



Morning Alert - Monday, March 19, 2018

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## HEADLINES

### Morning news

NHK led with Russian President Putin's landslide victory in Sunday's presidential election, while most commercial broadcasters gave prominent top play to reports that Japanese tennis player Naomi Osaka claimed her first Women's Tennis Association title at the BNP Paribas Open in Indian Wells on Sunday.

Major front-page items in national papers included a steep decline in public support for the Abe administration, the closing of the PyeongChang Paralympics, the Russian presidential election, and the reelection of Chinese Premier Li at the National People's Congress session yesterday.

## INTERNATIONAL

### U.S., Japan agree to step up pressure on North Korea

All Saturday national dailies reported from Washington on Foreign Minister Kono's meetings with high-ranking Trump administration officials on Friday, including Vice President Pence, National Security Advisor McMaster, and Defense Secretary Mattis. They reportedly agreed to continue to put maximum pressure on the DPRK to get it to abandon its nuclear and missile programs in a "complete, verifiable, and irreversible" manner. In response to the Japanese minister's request for President Trump to bring up the abduction issue during his proposed summit with DPRK leader Kim Jong Un, Vice President Pence reportedly said: "The United States is with Japan one hundred percent on the North Korea issue. We will coordinate closely in dealing with North Korea." After his meeting with the Vice President, Kono told the press that President Trump and other USG officials are interested in the abduction issue and that there are "no gaps" between the U.S. and Japan in responding to North Korea. McMaster reportedly told Kono that a nuclear-armed North Korea would be unacceptable.

According to the local press, during his meetings with McMaster and Deputy Secretary of State Sullivan, Kono asked that Japanese products be exempted from the tariffs that President Trump has decided to impose on steel and aluminum imports. Mainichi and Nikkei said Kono also met with outgoing Secretary of State Tillerson and conveyed Tokyo's gratitude for his efforts to strengthen bilateral relations.

### **Japan remains worried about U.S. approach to North Korea**

Most Sunday papers published wrap-ups on Foreign Minister Kono's U.S. tour, noting that despite U.S. assurances that the maximum pressure campaign against North Korea will continue, the GOJ is still apprehensive about the prospects for the proposed summit between President Trump and DPRK leader Kim Jong Un because of the apparent shakeup of the Trump administration's national security team. Yomiuri claimed the GOJ is concerned that the U.S. leader may cut a deal with the DPRK dictator in which he allows North Korea to keep its medium-range missiles in exchange for giving up on its development of ICBMs. Asahi asserted that although the GOJ is troubled by the personnel changes in the U.S. security team, it has no option but to rely on Washington in dealing with North Korea. The paper claimed that Kono successfully managed to secure cooperation from Vice President Pence and others in continuing the pressure campaign. Nikkei said Kono was attempting to apply the brakes on the U.S. administration's push for dialogue with Pyongyang, claiming that disarray may emerge between Tokyo and Washington over how to proceed with dialogue with the Kim regime. Sankei quoted a source accompanying the foreign minister as saying that Kono's aim was to warn the Trump administration not to compromise with North Korea. The conservative daily said Kono held meetings with a number of high-ranking USG officials with the goal of ensuring that all the key security officials in the U.S. understand Tokyo's position on North Korea.

### **DPRK diplomat may hold talks with ex-USG official in Finland**

Yomiuri and Nikkei took up a South Korean media report claiming that a senior North Korean diplomat in charge of North American affairs departed for Helsinki on Sunday to meet with former U.S. Ambassador to South Korea Stephens perhaps at the Japanese Embassy in the city.

### **Abe asks Moon to raise abduction issue during meeting with Kim Jong Un**

All Saturday morning dailies took up a teleconference on Friday between Prime Minister Abe and South Korean President Moon, during which the ROK leader reportedly expressed understanding for Abe's request that he address the abduction issue when meeting with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un in late April.

The two leaders reportedly agreed on continuing the maximum pressure campaign in coordination with the United States until the Kim regime takes concrete steps toward denuclearization. Abe reportedly stressed the necessity of IAEA inspections of DPRK nuclear facilities to confirm Kim's alleged commitment toward denuclearization. The Japanese leader also reportedly stated that he

was encouraged by South Korea's plan to hold naval exercises with the United States in the near future.

In a related development, all Sunday papers wrote from Washington that the foreign ministers of Japan and South Korea held a meeting in the U.S. capital on Saturday and agreed to step up the pressure on North Korea to the maximum extent possible in order to achieve denuclearization. FM Kono reportedly told his ROK counterpart Kang that Tokyo is willing to cover the initial costs for the IAEA to conduct on-site inspections of DPRK nuclear facilities.

All Monday papers took up an announcement by the South Korean Foreign Ministry on Sunday that Kang and Kono agreed to arrange another trip to Japan this year by President Moon in addition to a proposed visit for a trilateral summit with China, speculating that the two governments may be looking to organize a bilateral meeting between Abe and Moon in April or May.

### **Abe emphasizes importance of stronger pressure on DPRK**

All Monday papers highlighted Prime Minister Abe's remarks at the National Defense Academy commencement ceremony on Sunday, in which he underscored how critical it is for the international community to enhance the pressure on North Korea to the greatest extent possible until the defiant regime takes concrete steps toward denuclearization. He also stressed the important role that the SDF can play in cracking down on illicit trade in sanctioned items at sea involving DPRK vessels.

### **DPRK acknowledged Japanese abductee had entered North Korea**

Saturday morning's Tokyo Shimbun printed a Kyodo story on the disclosure by a GOJ source that the North Korean government admitted in 2014 during a conversation with the Japanese government that one of the 12 citizens certified by the GOJ as victims of North Korea's state-sponsored kidnapping had entered North Korea. According to the article, the DPRK side explained at the time that Minoru Tanaka, a Kobe resident who went missing after departing Narita Airport in June 1978, was in Pyongyang with his Korean family and that he was hoping to stay there and did not intend to return to Japan. This was reportedly the first time that the Kim regime had acknowledged the entry of a Japanese victim since it admitted the kidnapping of 13 other Japanese nationals during then-Prime Minister Koizumi's historic meeting with Kim Jong Il in 2002. The article added that an unnamed senior MOFA official refused to comment on the alleged admission by Pyongyang.

### **U.S. hospital ship to take part in U.S.-ROK drills**

Saturday morning's Asahi reported that the USNS Mercy, the world's largest hospital ship, is likely to participate in the U.S.-South Korean naval exercise to be held in the near future, speculating that the deployment signifies the U.S. military's resolve to maintain vigilance irrespective of the proposed U.S.-North Korea summit.

### **Trilateral security dialogue between U.S, Japan, ROK planned**

Saturday morning's Mainichi took up an MOD announcement on Friday that senior defense officials from the U.S. Japan, and South Korea will gather in Washington this week for trilateral talks over two days. The participants are likely to confirm enhanced coordination in the run-up to the proposed inter-Korean and U.S.-North Korea summits.

### **Top Russian diplomat concerned about Japan's deployment of missile defense platform**

Saturday morning's Tokyo Shimbun published an interview with Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov, during which he criticized the Aegis Ashore batteries that Japan plans to deploy by saying: "As they constitute part of the United States' global missile defense systems, they pose a direct threat to Russia.... Japan needs to remove barriers to promoting a strategic friendship." He went on to say, "While Japan has the right to choose its security partners, we also have the right to evaluate" Japan's choices. The Russian official also commented on the "joint economic activities" on the Northern Territories by saying that Tokyo should implement the initiative based on the present Russian legal system.

In a related story, Sunday's Mainichi reported on Foreign Minister Kono's reaction to Lavrov's criticism of Japan's planned procurement of Aegis Ashore batteries, quoting him as telling the press on Saturday: "As we have repeatedly explained the purpose of the deployment, which is to counter North Korea's nuclear and missile development, I think the Russians have come to understand our position."

### **Japan hoping for progress on territorial dispute talks with Russia**

Today's Yomiuri took up Putin's apparent victory in the Russian presidential election, noting that the GOJ is hoping that the reelection will reinforce his political foundation and thereby make it easier for him to yield concessions on the Northern Territories dispute. Prime Minister Abe is aiming to take two trips to Russia this year, to St. Petersburg in May and to Vladivostok in September, for talks with Putin to further deepen their personal bonds with the goal of resolving the longstanding territorial dispute. Abe is reportedly aiming to forge a consensus on specific projects for joint economic activities during his trip to St. Petersburg. Sankei projected that as President Putin is maintaining his hard line toward the United States and hence inclined to deepen ties with China, drastic improvements in Tokyo-Moscow relations, including on the Northern Territories issue, are very unlikely.

### **Former President Obama to visit Japan**

Kyodo reported on Saturday that former President Obama will visit Tokyo on March 25 to attend an international conference as part of an East Asia tour. The news agency noted that while Obama plans to hold talks with the leaders of Singapore, New Zealand, and Australia, he is not scheduled to meet with Prime Minister Abe.

## **POLITICS**

### **Cabinet approval plummets over document falsification scandal**

Asahi, Mainichi, Kyodo, and Jiji released the results of their latest public opinion surveys apparently pointing to voters' strong dissatisfaction with the Abe administration's handling of the document falsification scandal involving the Finance Ministry. Cabinet support stood at 31% while disapproval was 48% in the Asahi poll. The corresponding figures in the Mainichi, Kyodo, and Jiji surveys were 33% vs. 47%, 38.7% vs. 48.2%, and 39.3% vs. 40.4%. Approval plunged by about 10 points and disapproval rose as much as 15 points. In the Asahi poll, the support rate hit an all-time low since the premier took office in December 2012. The pollsters attributed the plunge to the Finance Ministry's acknowledgement that it tampered with official documents related to the controversial sale of state-owned land to private school operator Moritomo Gakuen. An overwhelming majority of the public held the premier and his cabinet accountable for the scandal, with more than half in all the polls saying that Deputy Prime Minister Aso should step down to take responsibility.

The news outlets said the data falsification scandal has dealt a major blow to the Abe administration, noting that since more LDP officials are apparently critical of the prime minister amid the growing public discontent, his reelection bid in the September party presidential race may not be successful. Asahi speculated that Abe's "power monopoly" in the ruling party may be coming to an end, while Mainichi predicted that the premier may be tempted to arrange a summit with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un as a political gambit to restore his political standing.

## **ECONOMY**

### **Japan bracing for U.S. tariffs on metal imports**

Nikkei wrote on Sunday that a consensus is emerging among GOJ officials that U.S.-bound Japanese steel and aluminum products cannot be spared from the planned tariffs at least initially since the Trump administration has not yet responded to Japan's repeated requests for exemption. The paper asserted that as President Trump has frequently taken issue with the bilateral trade imbalance, they are bracing for Washington to take a tough stance on Japanese metal imports. Some Japanese officials are reportedly worried that strongly calling for an exemption from the tariffs might backfire by prompting the U.S. to step up its pressure over other trade issues, such as autos and agriculture. A GOJ source reportedly stated that Japan will not make concessions on beef and other items to protect steel.

### **GOJ trying to reach out to U.S. governors to play up Japan's economic contributions**

Saturday's Sankei wrote that the Abe administration is eager to lobby local U.S. governments to highlight Japanese businesses' active contributions to the U.S. economy with the goal of reining in President Trump's criticism of the bilateral trade imbalance. The GOJ has decided to convene a U.S.-Japan Governors' Association meeting for the first time in 23 years, with Prime Minister Abe

reportedly planning to meet with U.S. governors in Tokyo in late August. MOFA also earmarked some \$9.4 million in FY2018 for public relations campaigns, including organizing seminars and airing TV commercials in American cities particularly in the Rust Belt to call attention to Japan's robust business investment in local economies.

## **SECURITY**

### **Okinawa governor acknowledges difficulty in finding Henoko alternative**

Saturday morning's Tokyo Shimbun took up press remarks on Friday by Okinawa Governor Onaga upon his return from Washington where he met with Trump administration and congressional officials. Speaking on his main goal of seeking alternatives to the existing Futenma relocation plan during the U.S. trip, the governor said: "I've found that it is difficult to refute the assertion that the Henoko plan is the only viable solution." The governor, however, emphasized that there is no latitude for the local people to compromise on their opposition to the FRF project.

### **Proposed JSDF Osprey deployment may complicate Japanese amphibious brigade rollout in Nagasaki**

Monday's Asahi highlighted the planned establishment of a GSDF amphibious brigade in Nagasaki next week. The paper noted that the launch of a force similar to the U.S. Marine Corps might not go very smoothly because the proposed deployment of MV-22s at Saga Airport beginning in FY2019, which are expected to play a key role in transporting amphibious vehicles and personnel from an SDF base in Nagasaki to trouble spots in the event of a contingency, has run into difficulties due to a series of mishaps involving USMC Ospreys and a GSDF helicopter crash in Saga Prefecture last month. As the Saga deployment has become "almost impossible" in the words of a senior government official, the Defense Ministry is being forced to find an alternative location for the 17 tilt-rotor planes.

